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Camas

THE NATURE OF THE WEST

Summer 2011

THE NATURE OF THE WEST Camas

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OUR TITLE *Camas* takes its name from the plant *Camassia quamash*, which American Indian tribes from the Rocky Mountains to the Cascades honor as a staple of sustenance. Care of the camas prairies passes from generation to generation.

OUR VISION Across the landscape of its pages, *Camas* cultivates new ideas and perspectives while remaining rooted in the inherited traditions of art and literature of the American West.

OUR FRIENDS *Camas* received generous support for this issue from the Associated Students of The University of Montana and The Environmental Studies Program.

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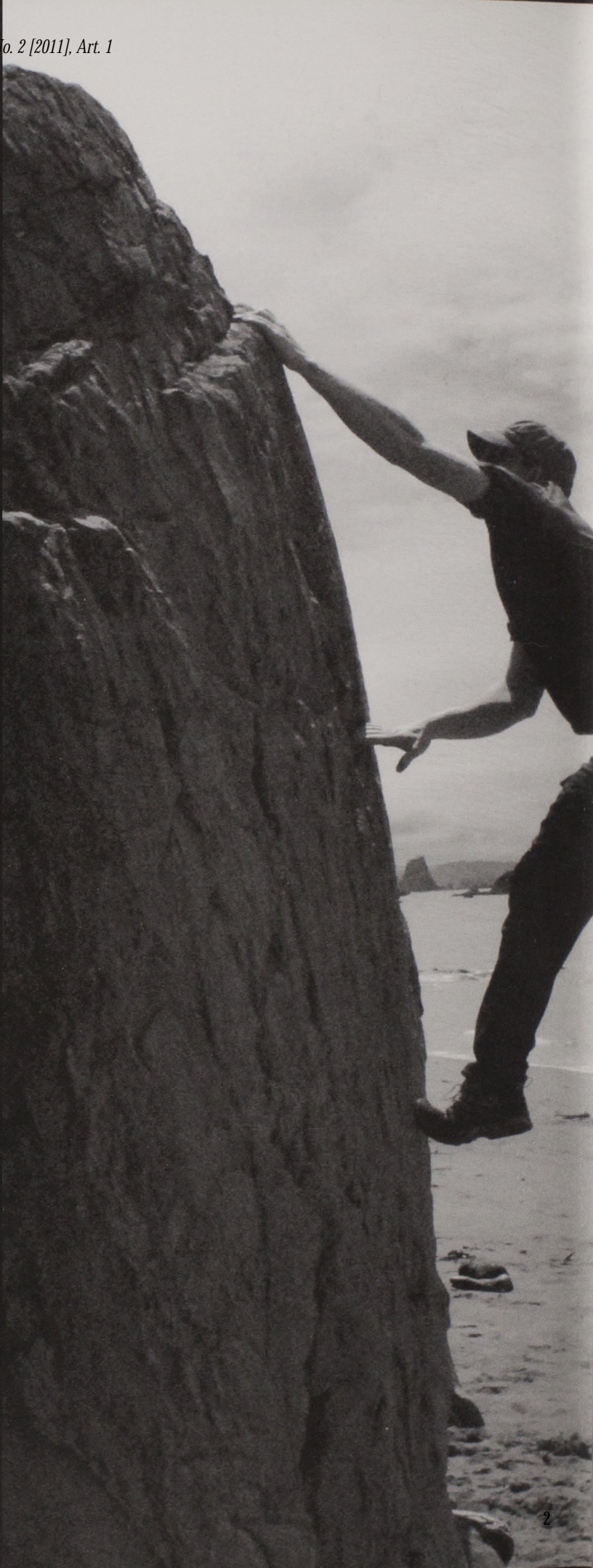
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New York in summer. Cover photo/ANIELA DROZDOWSKA
Jason Jones in La Push, Washington. Photo/ELIZABETH RUFF

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WVA

NER



From the Editors:

Water calls, but humanity rarely knows how to answer.

This issue of *Camas* gazes briefly into the bottomless depths of water's many forms, functions, and forces. Yes, water can steal our breath in its beauty, but it can also steal our last breath of life. Water shapes the contours of the earth, washes the sky in color, cradles your body weightless, and makes full each cell of every living thing. Water is our future, our hope, our shame, and our filth. It is the most ugly of places on this planet, and the purest of places for prayer. It is the violence of tsunamis and floods, and it is the banality of dishwater. In all of its multiplicities, it reminds us continually, gently, thunderously, and endlessly: water is what we are.

As humans consider water's role on this planet, we'll learn more about our own. Ultimately, we determine who we are as a species by how we come to know our aqueous souls.

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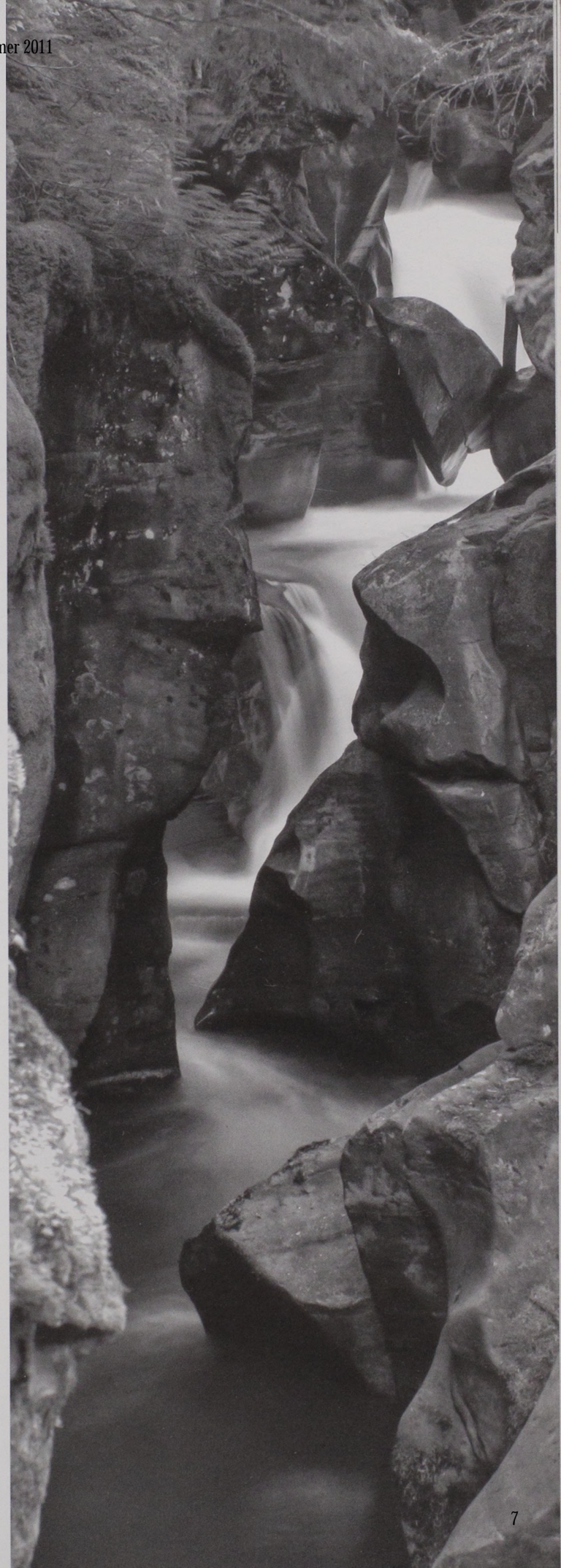
Engraved sidewalk in La Push, Washington.

Preceding Photo/ELIZABETH RUFF

Icebergs melt in the Alaskan surf. Left Photo/ANIELA DROZDOWSKA

Avalanche Gorge, Glacier National Park. Right Photo/MATT ROGERS

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Kiros

ALICE BOLIN

The town square tapers to seven verdant corners. Each is meant to represent one of the stars of Orion, or the seven yellow hills guarding the town. The residents have taken to affectionately calling the hills “mountains.”

Each of the mountains is lined at its base by stars and scented like camphor. The stars are waxy pellets placed there to attract rabbits. The rabbits of Kiros are famed for their perfumed pelts, and the mothers of Kiros might call their children “star pellet” and their children’s lunchtime meal, “star soup.”

Just beyond the mountains are several settlements of waxen houses. They are arranged lakeside like kisses on a cheek. The lake is a meadow of blue wildflowers tatted by the wind. The people in the wax houses gather the flowers daily—they are treasured for the dye made from their crushed petals. The wax people are of course called “bees.”

It is common for a pilgrim to walk from the lake down a steep and scrubby mesa, from there a straight path to the sea. The oracle’s hut is roofless so at night the stars glow through. The oracle lists back and forth in the ocean gusts—it was molded by the first pilgrims from beeswax and birds wings. The wind through the oracle’s wings sometimes hisses “Yes, yes.”

The salt flats of Badwater Basin, Death Valley National Park, CA.
Photo/KATIE NELSON





Life on a River

RICK BASS

WHAT'S THE MOST any one person can accomplish, in a single gesture, a single vision, a single-minded goal over the course of but one lifetime? Here in the western United States, we want to believe the answer to that question is *a lot*—but even so, as an environmentalist, I worry that even a lot is never quite enough. It can be discouraging to consider all the things that need protecting, and further discouraging to perceive that time is not on your side. You do the best you can, but it's never enough. To possess an ecological consciousness, the American ecologist Aldo Leopold reminded us seventy years ago, is to be aware that we live in a world of wounds.

My own environmental efforts in the farthest northwest corner of Montana—a million-acre postage-stamp rain forest kind of a place within the larger fabric of the Rocky Mountains, home to an astonishing biological diversity—have tended toward protecting the mountains and forests. I live in a million-acre valley, the Yaak Valley, where there are only about 150 year-round residents. It's taken 47 years, but with Senator Jon Tester's help, we're finally about to convince the government to protect roughly twelve percent of the valley from any logging, roadbuilding, or mining. This is not as much protection as we want, but it's a good start. It's not a victory, but it's success.

The Yaak is a magical valley, right up on the Canadian line, where nothing has gone extinct since the end of the last Ice Age. It's still home to grizzly bears, wolves, wolverine, moose, eagles, owls, lynx, mountain lions, even an occasional woodland caribou.

When I moved up here from the southern United States, I was a fiction writer, but then I became an environmental activist, perceiving that the individual mountains I had fallen in love with were far more important than any book or short story, and that the best way I could spend my days was by laboring on their behalf. I still believe that, but I'm not so sure now that maybe storytelling isn't the best way to accomplish these goals: to help people continue to believe, particularly in times of daunting and even overwhelming stress, insurmountable challenges, that even one puny person can—over the course of a brief life—make an enormous impact for the better.

It hasn't been easy, protecting that 12%, to say the least, and the only insight or advice I can offer for any environmental struggle is that an individual setting out on such a journey will require not just vision, but patience—the latter so much more rare and difficult to obtain, especially as we perceive—accurately, I fear—that time is running out.

“ *The personal economy of each of us is a thing more within our ability to control than national or global decisions.* ”

Two important stories come to mind immediately in this regard—vision and patience—both close to home; and interestingly neither has to do with the mountains and forests to which I find myself so attracted, but rather, with the rivers that pass through these mountains; and, equally interesting, both stories have to do not with efforts to preserve the last crumbs of purer, wilder, unexploited country, but instead, the restoration of damaged country: lands of compromised ecological integrity.

One story is small, and the other is large. The little one first: in the Yaak, a once-upon-a-time young man (he's forty-four now), Scott Daily, got it in his mind that if he found funding and created an economic infrastructure—a business—on national forest lands damaged by clearcutting, the same people who had over-logged the forests (whose jobs were now gone) would be happy to take jobs repairing those lands: recontouring the torn hillsides, planting streamside vegetation along the disintegrating banks of wild little creeks. He and an associate with the Yaak Valley Forest Council (www.yaakvalley.org), Robyn King, called their project the Headwaters

Barbed wire guards the deadly toxic waters of the Berkeley Pit in Butte, Montana.

Photo/DOUG DAVIS

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Restoration Partnership, and later Scott started a native plants nursery devoted to supplying the seeds and saplings for such restorations. They found grants and donations to conduct stream surveys that maintained the health of the creeks and rivers where they were working in the Yaak, employing ten and sometimes twenty people in a year. There was nothing about their little project that was world-changing, really, in a planet that slouches toward a population of seven billion, but it's a good story, one that comes into sharper focus when you stand in waist-high lush foliage along the Yaak River and peer down into the clear riffles as it rushes past.

The second story is bigger. In a watershed just to the south of the Yaak—the Clark Fork—activists with the Clark Fork Coalition (www.clarkfork.org) have removed an entire dam and released a previously-wild river back to its natural course and rhythms. The dam was downstream of a gold, silver and copper mine, and over the decades had trapped tons of arsenic and other toxins from the mine, sediments which had to be dug up and trucked away and sealed off, out of the floodplain, costing hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars: one of the many hidden costs of a product under an old system of accounting that we are only now beginning to examine more closely. This, too, created jobs, and helped restore the environment, though in the end it wasn't the mining company that paid for it, but everyone else.

“ *By observing smaller stories of individuals, we find ourselves better able to hope, and even believe in, those larger stories, the successful outcome of which will be vital to our survival on the planet.* ”

A third story comes to mind, of course, and then a fourth, regarding the price of oil and its usually hidden costs. Is gasoline worth \$3.39 a gallon? Yes, we generally think it is. But is gasoline worth an entire swath of the United States' Gulf Coast, or a Florida-sized open pit up where Albert's carbon-absorbing boreal forest currently grows as a cap above the tar sands? Well, probably not, most would say. What then is the real cost, and who pays it, and when? I don't think we have the answers to those questions yet, but at least we're finally beginning to consider them.

But back to this idea of stories and individuals. The personal economy of each of us is a thing more within our ability to control than national or global decisions. Within our personal economies, how much energy, passion, and other resources—including one of the rarer emotions, hope—do each of us allocate to the natural world, beginning first and foremost at home?

Here in western Montana, where there are so many activists, a simple rule of thumb might well be the adage, To whom much has been given, much is expected. So many activists here speak of giving back to a landscape, with their work, in some proportion to the blessings they have received from that landscape.

I don't know of any stories yet that can address what's going on in the Gulf, or Alberta. The scale of these disasters alarms me. Protecting a forest or mountain, or repairing a creek, or even re-routing a major river: we can do these things, whether led by individuals, or as collective entities. But some stories, I fear, can get out ahead of themselves, and our ability to even influence them.

What's worked on a relatively small scale here in Montana is showing people another way—providing them with an alternative beyond a simple “No.” (Not that there isn't sometimes a place and a time for that No.) I guess that's the same pattern or model we'll need to follow these questions of greater scale, as we encounter stronger storms and hurricanes, rising ocean levels, oil spills, wildfires, etc., as the old world shifts and shrugs, as if attempting to make itself new again.

Maybe it's that simple: that by observing smaller stories of individuals, we find ourselves better able to hope, and even believe in, those larger stories, the successful outcome of which will be vital to our survival on the planet. Scott fixing rivers in the Yaak, or a community taking out a toxic dam on the Clark Fork, won't save the world. But these stories create an environment—like a fertile garden—in which larger stories hopefully can still yet be imagined, and then grown, and we might yet soon begin wrestling back control from the corporations we have allowed into the garden of Montana and the West.

Early morning on the shores of Lake Kontrashibuna in Lake Clark National Park, Alaska.

Photo/JACQUI LOWN





Fine drops of fog blur an early morning in Chapel Hill, Texas.

Photo/CHRISTOPHER WOODS

In the Season of Rivers

MAYA JEWELL ZELLER

We learned to drive on mud
slick roads. Some floods
brought cows across the fields,
carcasses bloating in April sun
until Fitz could get a tractor
through wet ground to lift them.
Our eyes had trouble sticking
to the streets. Beside us trees
were ominous with green;
deep through their branches
blue looked down to streams,
to grass ablaze with yellow blooms.
Our legs ached like horses' legs
ache, not like dormant wheels.

A Water Education

EMERALD LAFORTUNE

For Jim LaFortune, 1959-2010

WE DRIVE SOUTH through jade-green wheat fields, and turn east at the putrid paper mill that marks the Clearwater River. As we follow semi trucks and sedans along winding curves, a quiet bubble in my bones turns into a trickle, tickling my stomach and kidneys. By Dworshack Dam the trickle is a stream, flowing urgently around my chest. At the first sight of the Lochsa River some part of my water-laden body responds, sensing home. The small, steep river tumbles down from the mountains of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, swollen with snow and the promise of spring. At sixteen years old, I'm not quite sure what love is, but I suspect it feels something like that stream around my heart, exploding into a class four rapid.

My father and I don't speak as we push our boats into the water. I am nervous, my legs thrumming and my hands sweating. My father smiles, face upturned to the midday sun. This river isn't just water following gravity over rocks and around fallen ponderosas, it's a live being, and I ask for some beginners luck and sympathy in her grasp. Although never spoken aloud, a part of me knows that over the years of running rivers, my father has taught me to do this. The best boatmen don't fight against the river, they work with it, adding suggestions with their oars or paddles.

By the third drop, the river and I are in conversation. Sunlight dances in the swirling green eddies and disappears in the white froth of waves and holes. Elation runs down to my neoprene clad feet as I slam into wave after wave. I smile, I laugh, I grin like a damn fool, abandoning my teenage awkwardness for untainted joy. The river is teaching me that the natural world is more powerful and essential than I will ever be.

I CHOSE TO GO to college in Montana because the mountains and rivers whisper promises in my ear. I have a crush. I want to further this alternative education, even as I immerse myself in textbooks, lectures and homework assignments. The Lochsa River is only two short hours on winding highway. My father and I will meet halfway come spring, in our real shared home.

A week into my freshman semester, my mother calls me. She is not crying, but she sounds exhausted and scared.

"Dad has a brain tumor, and it's likely terminal."

I buy myself a piece of chocolate cake and find a secluded spot next to the Clark Fork. I am not yet acquainted with this river, but I ask her to hold me anyways. I close my eyes and let my heart fill with the whisper of water rolling over rock and gravel. The only

thought I can pick out of my stunned mind is, *Please, please let us raft the Lochsa one more time. Just once.*

I am not religious and I don't know who or what to pray to. So I pray to the rivers. I pray to the languid afternoons of my childhood spent digging and building on the sandbars of the Salmon River. I pray to the river otters devouring a salmon carcass on the banks of the Rogue River. I pray to the steep, rhyolite walls of Green Dragon Canyon on the Owyhee River. I pray to the awe and wonder of watching the Selway River consume full sized trees like they are matchsticks. I pray to the deep emerald-green pools of the Lochsa River. I summon all the water education I have acquired over my eighteen years of life. *Please.*

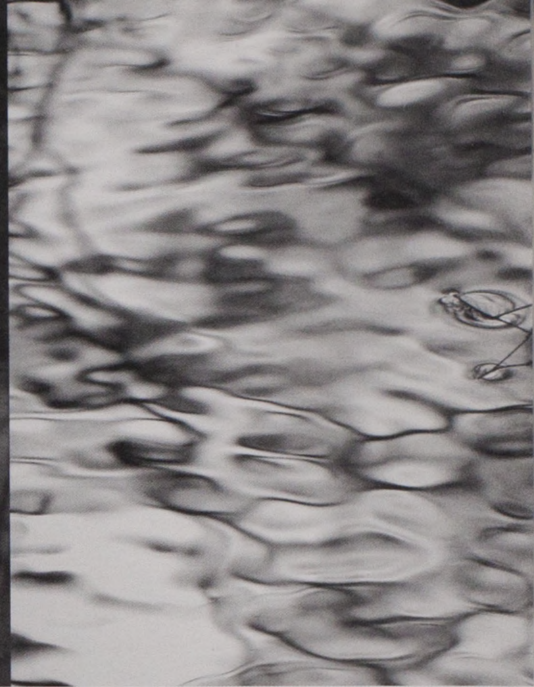
DESPITE THE DIAGNOSIS, statistics and scientific reasoning, spring returns with my father in tow. He has brain cancer. He will not magically get better. He will not live to meet his grandchildren nor watch his wife's hair turn gray. Yet he will raft the Lochsa one more time.

Again, we are silent as we push our boats into the water. My boating skills have grown and I have spent the previous summer raft guiding. I no longer need to study my father's every stroke and pull of the oars, but I follow anyways. He has been having trouble finding the right words and finishing sentences. His skin looks gaunt around his eyes and his daily afternoon naps are growing in length. Yet he can still speak to the river. He is not rowing, he is dancing, and every wave and swirl is another partner. He still smiles, face upturned towards the sun.

ON A RAINY NIGHT in November, I wake to the creak of my door opening.

"It's over, Emerald, it's over. He's gone" is whispered through the darkness. A quick kiss on the forehead and the door clicks shut. I lay awake, staring towards the black ceiling. I take a short breath in, exhale out. The months to come will hold their share of tears, the water of our home rivers flowing down my face instead of through my bones. More than once I will collapse onto the kitchen floor head in hands. But at this moment, in the dark of my childhood home, all I feel is the familiar bubbling, the whisper of water and cedar trees. The warmth of the sun heats my face and my father, smiling, guides his boat over a rolling wave.

In the spring I will again cross the mountains to the Lochsa River. I will let the wind grab my father's ashes from my hand and scatter them into the green water beneath my boat. Yet I suspect he is already there, waiting to teach me more, to further my water education. I still consider myself a lucky daughter, despite losing a father. I had not only the education of a parent, but also the education of the wild, free-flowing rivers of the west.



Leaving Arizona

SARAH WEATHERBY

THERE IS NOTHING but the distance and the sun behind you is some sort of monster, turning yellow then orange and burning out on the ground like a distant fire. There are fences, barbed wire along the road and it is hot. Your skin is dry from the heat.

A man sleeps next to you. His long legs disappear under the dash. It is too cramped in the truck and it is late in the day. Almost night. You smoke a cigarette and stare out at the path the sun took across the sky and still that sky is a burned out white instead of blue.

You see an occasional dust devil spinning, the dry brush, the monotony of the cattle with their dumb weight pressing against the fencing as though that were shade, an escape from the heat, and beyond it all the red rock spires of the Navajo formation, the blue green of the distant mountains.

The man next to you is beautiful, and you are driving to the only place that ever felt like home to him, and you drive on this back road, somewhere in desert, for what seems like hours without seeing another car.

You have the windows down because the truck has no air conditioning and you drive and he sleeps, and somewhere in the distance down the road there must be clouds built from the heat because there is lightning.

You drive and you remember being a kid, running through the desert in the summer, wearing boots and pants – even though it was too hot for this – because of the snakes and the cactus. You remember looking for the places where lightning had touched down quick out there, trying to find where it had burned the sand into a column of glass.

The man next to you must be awake because he says something about the sun going down behind you.

Something about how round it is. You don't look over at him and you don't stop smoking but he touches your knee and you pull off the road and turn off the truck. He gets out and you follow, remembering how you would listen for the dry rattle of snakes over the buzzing of insects, the way the thorn bushes caught against your skin as you ran.

There is glass along-side the road, although it seems like there could never have been people here, never will be besides the two of you in this time. Beyond the glass, you see a deer carcass laid out in the dry brush as though it is sleeping, its flesh dried out and without smell. The heat is worse when you're not moving and the man pulls off his shirt because of it. You stare at the marks on his body as he stares at the sun. The dragon-fly on his arm. The name above his elbow that is not your name. He opens the cooler in the back of the truck and takes out two beers and dips his shirt into the ice and water then wraps it around the beers and climbs back into the truck.

When you pull back onto the road the sun is gone and the lightning is sudden flashes in the distance. For a while you are both quiet, staring down the road. You open a beer and can't believe how cold the bottle feels against your hand.

The man you are traveling with begins to talk, in that slow way of his. Tonight he speaks of the color in this desert, the red and blues. The greenness that is so different to the brown of Afghanistan and you know that he is again thinking of the man that he killed, the burned color of that flesh and the burying of it. You know this, like you know of the place of his birth and the age that he joined the army and was sent to be a medic in desert country far from his own. But still there are things that you do not know. Like



Surface tension. Photos/HUNTER D'ANTUONO

why he came to this part of the country, or why he could not stay married to his wife.

As he speaks of night time caravans of armored Humvees traveling up rivers – when there were rivers, in the brevity of spring – in order to avoid roadside bombs and militant strong holds, you are thinking of the sand in your childhood, still damp in the morning and looking like stars under your feet. The sound of cicadas, like rattling seeds in a closed hand. The neighbor calling out to you, “mi’ja” each morning as you ran out into the desert, even though you weren’t her daughter. But most of all, you remember the heat, licking the inside of your wrist each afternoon to taste the salt there. You remember all of this and you can’t imagine what it must have been like for him in that time and place.

Somewhere outside of Escalante you stop at a diner. There is lightning, still off in the distance but you can sometimes hear the low tones of thunder and when the wind blows, kicking up dust from the parking lot, you briefly smell rain. As you walk into the building – lit up and fluorescent – the man you are traveling with briefly takes your hand, squeezing it as if to say thank you, then letting it fall. You stand there for a moment and let him walk ahead of you, staring at the length of his body, the leanness of it, then slowly follow him inside.

The diner is empty but for one waitress, a middle-aged woman whose garments peek out around the edges of her clothing. You walk back into the bathroom and wash your hands and stare at your face in the mirror above the sink, wondering what the hell you are doing here at this time of night and then you wash your face and walk back into the dining area.

He is already at a booth, drinking a Corona that he must have brought in from the truck. There is a second one set next to him, and you slide into the booth and take it in

your hand but don’t have any. “You know,” he says. “I always heard that the closer you were to the border, the better these tasted.” You shake your head and lean against him, wondering what border he is speaking of. “What is it?” he asks.

“My father always said any beer you had to put lime in wasn’t worth shit.” And he laughs because you are both so tired. Outside, sand starts to blow across the parking lot.

“What else did your father say?” he asks.

“Never feed a dog chicken bones,” you answer, “and don’t move to Montana with some boy just because he asked you to.” He stares down at you for a minute then takes a drink of his beer.

“Never feed a dog chicken bones?” he asks.

“They get them caught in their throat,” you say.

Outside of the diner the sand is blowing across the empty parking lot and it builds like snow on the ground. When he pulls the truck back onto the road, he drives slowly but still you cannot see very far ahead. You want to smoke a cigarette but won’t because of the sand in the air, so instead you lean across the bench seat and put your head in his lap, and try to sleep. You think about how once in the desert you heard the soft shaking of a baby’s rattle, and turned in time to see a snake coiling behind you. You remember being surprised at the color of the snake, not really brown but a slate gray instead, and how you froze staring at it.

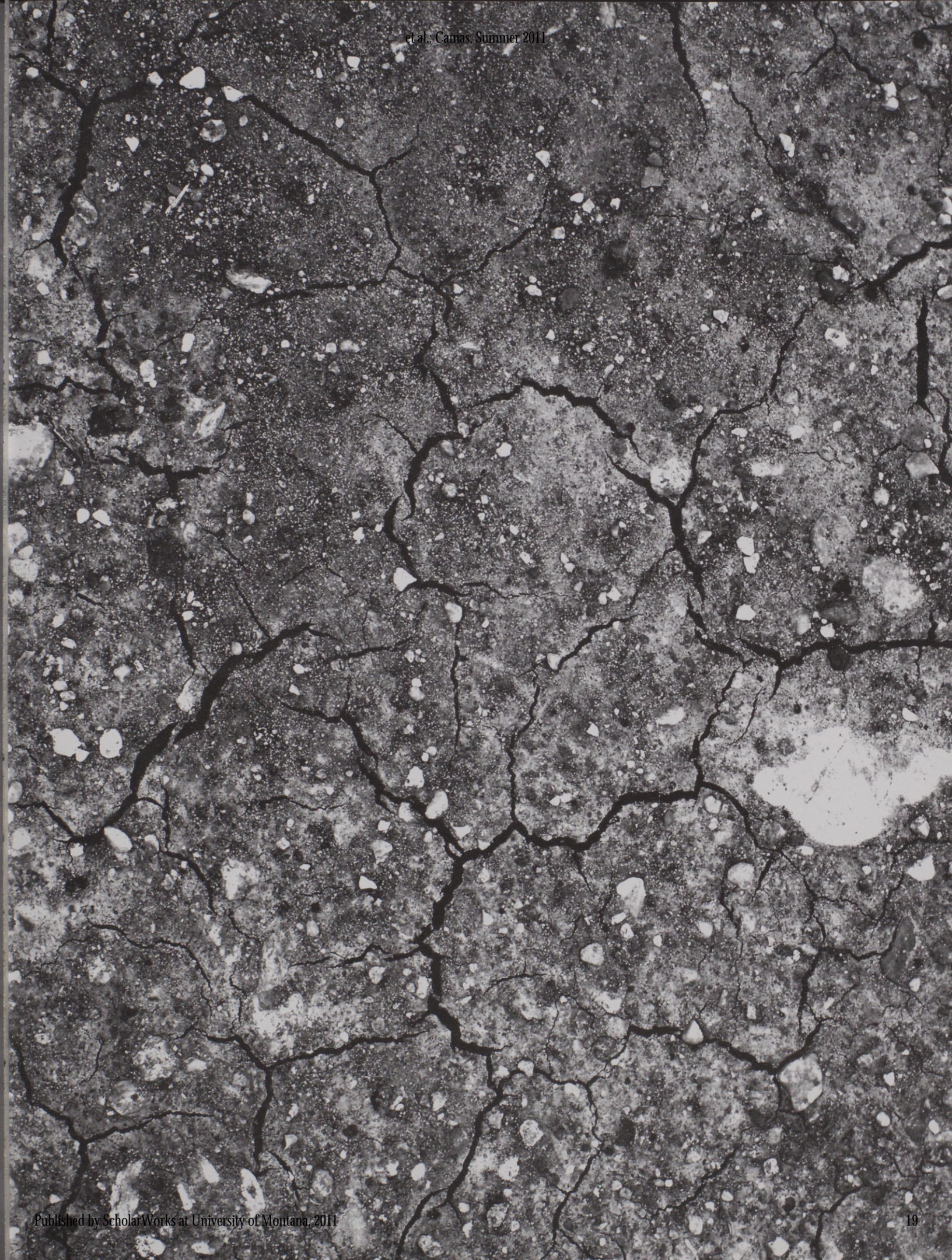
“Montana,” the man says, and he says it slowly and quietly and reaches down to tuck a piece of hair behind your ear. “You know, there’s actually water. Lakes and creeks. And the trees there are green.” You remember the only water being in canyons. How some of the canyons were so deep that you could see the stars during the day.

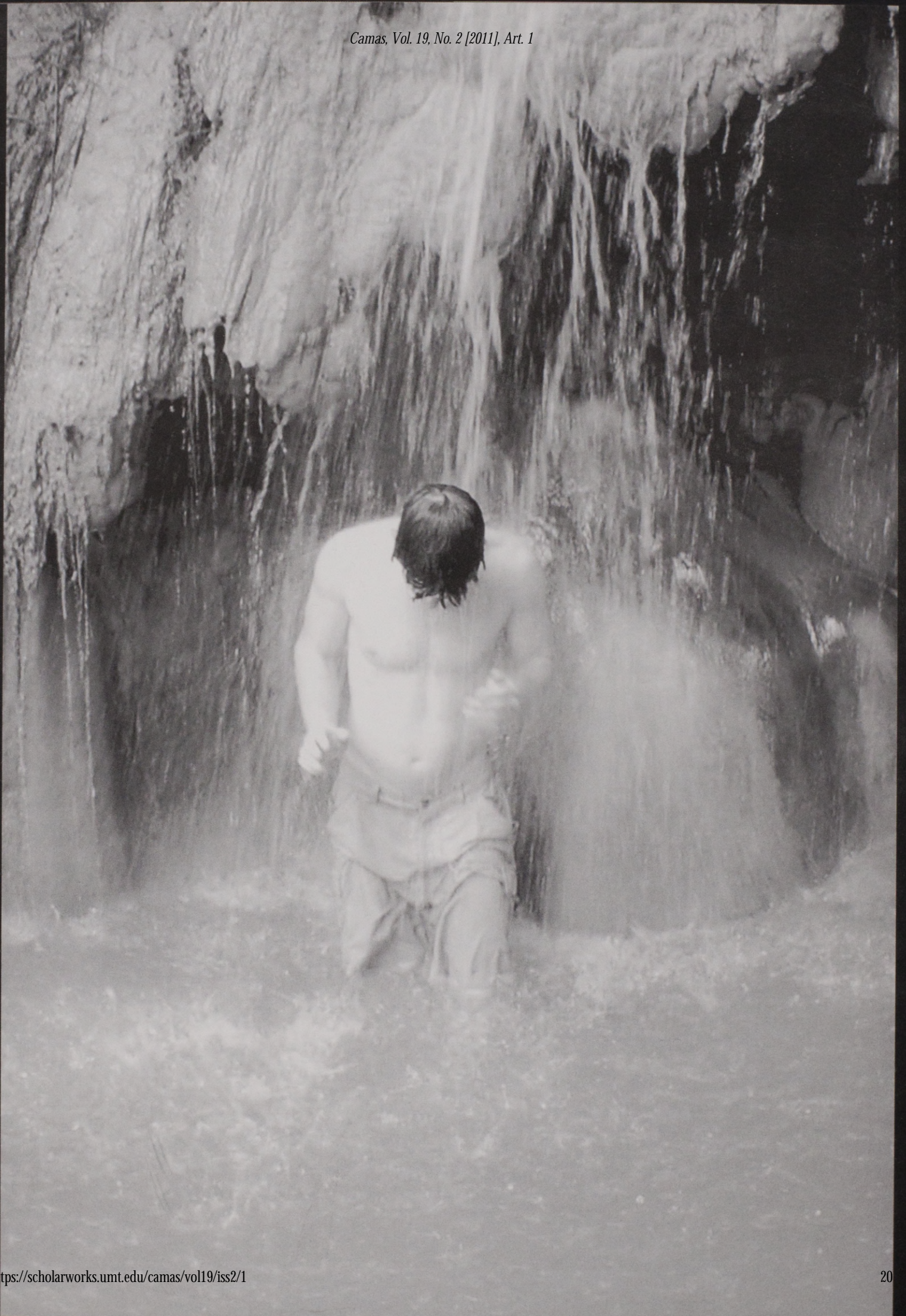
A Humane Way of Killing Animals

MACKENZIE COLE

Not too long ago, the mine fire swept through. The horse stables went. They laid down when they felt the pull of the heat. Been blind from darkness long enough to know what was ahead—their nostrils wide thirsting for the wet air, the mist fat on the pine needles, the creek ranging through the double shadow of the canyon.

Water's absence tattoos the earth.
Photo/MICAH SEWELL





Columbiano

STEVEN AGUILAR

The thing that used to be a river,
with waterfalls like Celilo
is only sleeping

I know
it broke through the canal near Quincy
got loose and cut the dirt road
we took to get to school
I thanked the river then
for saving me from the boy who said Esteban
was not a name, or a word, even

It was angry in the orchards at Orondo, breaking things
sloshing in the pipes I hauled around
and heavy in the peaches I hoped
would be a ticket out of here

In college I'd take the long way down
from Yakima, through Zillah and Sunnyside, Highway 24
that girl we called La Panadera riding shotgun going down
some back road basalt hallway to the water.

Below Priest Rapids dam
I went deep and the river held me
tousled my hair too long
spit me out, gasping

Never mind the dams,
a billion yards of concrete, obstructions
The thing is only sleeping
and it can only rise

Jason Jones cools off in the Toraille Falls near Soufriere, St. Lucia.

Photo/ELIZABETH RUFF

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A California coast morning. Photo/SKYLER SUHRER

Ounces and Pounds

MICAH SEWELL

FROM ONE PACIFIC island to another, I thought, as I prepared to move from Mejit, a tiny coral island wedged halfway between Hawai'i, Australia, and the end of the world, to Whidbey Island, a noodle-shaped place north of Seattle in the Puget Sound.

On Mejit, miles away from any other sliver of land, my stomach had become intimately aware of the price of gasoline. When it was too expensive, the supply ship wouldn't come, and the island's food supplies would dwindle. Someone, I thought, must be getting a good benefit from the tightening of this vise grip. Five thousand miles away, in the northern reaches of the Alberta Tar Sands, perhaps an oilman winked as he lit his cigar with a fifty dollar bill. In 2007, as I was making my move, gas prices in the Marshall Islands broke \$5 a gallon for the first time.

Whidbey Island offered a few more amenities. Electricity, indoor plumbing, and English-speaking in-

habitants all struck me as luxurious benefits. True, the smell of the salt air was distant, less inviting from my new house, tucked away in cedars and firs, but at least I could walk farther than a half-mile without entering open ocean.

On one walk, a few miles away from home at a salmon recovery project, I came across a bloated stream, spilling its banks and flooding the small flat it flowed through. "Beavers downstream," said my guide. "They've blocked the channel right up"; her words left beavers as cholesterol in the arteries of human design.

MILLIONS OF BEAVER-YEARS before Whidbey Island existed in form or name, the Earth was at work, teeth gnashing at the void. Deep underground, concentrated plant remains succumbed to the pressure; pure veins of coal, natural gas and oil began to form. On the surface, with less pressure bearing down, these

same remains became peat bogs. Somewhere in between, around 200 feet down, they formed less pure conglomerates of heavy oil, or bitumen, mixed with sand, clay, rock, and soil. The largest of these deposits formed in what is now northeastern Alberta, under boreal forest and peat. For millions of years, all of it lay underneath a thick blanket of glacial ice, undisturbed. No longer.

Native peoples in Alberta have known about the bitumen deposits of the tar sands, used them to waterproof their canoes, for hundreds of years. This knowledge spread to the earliest white traders, who tucked it away in a cultural piggy bank, waiting until enough interest and leverage accrued. That time has come - modern technology has developed to a point where we can exploit the bitumen deposits on a grand scale, and demand for oil has outstripped supply enough to justify the extra work.

Bitumen is heavy and impure; it holds on with a tenacious grip to the soil and rock it's bound up with. To separate it, we usually burn natural gas to convert water into bond-breaking steam. It costs us between \$60 and \$80 per barrel to extract, making it feasible only in times of elevated oil prices. As production expands, areas of lower quality will inevitably be mined, raising our costs - economic and environmental - further.

ONCE, JUST BEFORE I moved away from the island, the tranquil creek began to rage. Days earlier, a beaver carcass had appeared on the side of the road. As its mangled body began to decay, so did its home at the outlet of the wetlands. Without maintenance, new application of peat and mud and grass, the logs and mud gave way, piece by piece. Pressure built behind the dam, probed with nimble fingers for the weak point - a keystone that would unlock the creek channel. The beaver dam, and the family that once held it in place, disintegrated. Entropy spiraled outward and reached a breaking point, washing home away in the current.

I've heard that the same thing happened ten years before, the last time the beaver dam disappeared. Given the option to install a larger culvert, one that would allow salmon to pass through and lessen the potential for flood damage, the county declined - too expensive. A bit of thought to the future, I thought to myself, and a healthy respect for the freedom and power of wild things, would have kept this situation from escalating. You ask for too much, came the silent reply.

I watched the torrent tear away the road, piece by piece. As I turned to make the short walk towards home, the insatiable flood of whitewater tore its path clear and surged downward, overtaking the handful of houses built on its floodplain next to the sea.

I DON'T LIVE there anymore, next to that flooded creek with the missing road. I live in Montana now. *Oro y plata*, our state motto declares. Generations of Montanans built their livelihoods on the bounties of this land. Butte fueled decades of American industry; our timber, grain, and livestock continue to supply national demands. But the other side of the past is the future, which seems less considered here than most anywhere else.

If we care about the legacy we leave, it falls to us to be more responsible about the future than those that came before us. Exxon and Conoco encourage us to upgrade roads, bury power lines, and allow trucks longer and larger than Boeing 747s to pass through our towns, Lolo and Choteau and Kooskia and Missoula, on their way to mines several orders of magnitude larger than the Berkeley Pit - mines measured not in square feet, but in hundreds of square miles. They can pay us to make these upgrades. They can pay our representatives to come along quietly. They can, in fact, do damn near anything they please, so long as it doesn't require a conscience, something corporations have never developed. But they can't, and certainly won't, cover the costs of tomorrow, as crucial fish habitat slips away forever, our climate slides toward catastrophe, Canadian First Peoples are poisoned and disenfranchised, and our communities continue to break apart. Who will?

I WALKED DOWN the fresh-carved creek bed the day after the flood. Pieces of industry, modern and historic, were strewn everywhere. Chunks of asphalt taller than me, made from bitumen once buried, perhaps, under a boreal forest thousands of miles away, carried a thousand feet downstream and upended. A vise grip so rusted that it could have laid under the water for a hundred years before this revelation. Beyond these things I saw pristine sand bars free of vegetation, scoured clean by the roiling waters. I splashed around in the newness of it all. Unbound freedom coursed through the water under my feet, subject at that moment only to the downward pull of gravity. I walked toward home, past salmonberry bushes just beginning to flower. The water flowed down, down and on.



Electricity

NICOLE FUCIGNA

filaments & phonetics—passions & pistons
vowels & voltage—amperes & ambitions

“Gold King Mine”—“Old Fling Time”
“Mine, boys, mine”—steady hum

of men—of mine—of megalomania
production—outpacing perception

this mastery—a sorcery—a source
of apprehension—keep an eye

on the ions—you pinheads—elect
the right electron—ignite



A wheel line stretches over a barley field in southern Idaho.

Photo/SAREN CALL

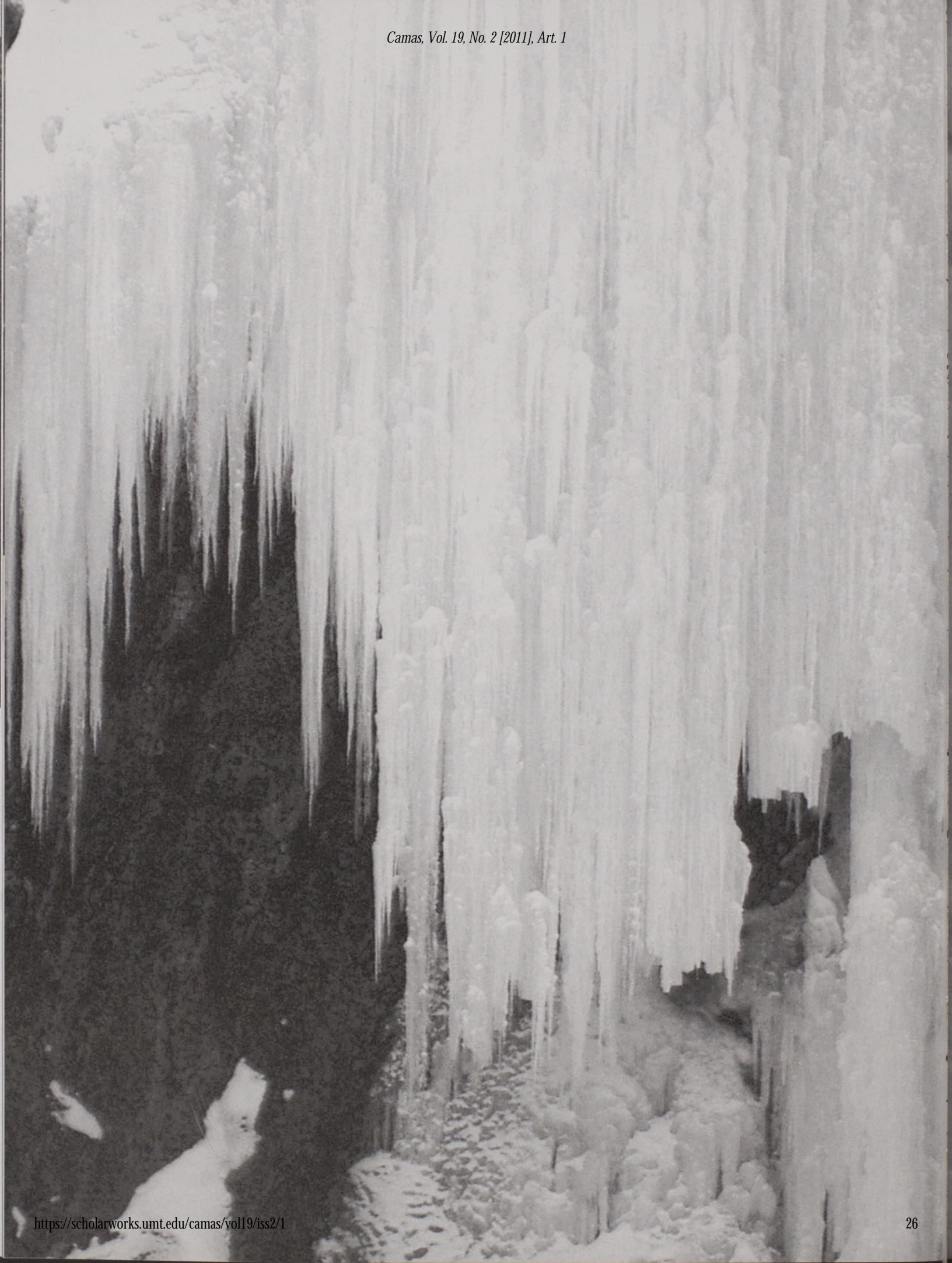
Water powers the violent ratcheting of a lawn sprinkler.

Left Photo/HUNTER D'ANTUONO

the electric city—housewives & whores
night fights & negligee—the dancing

the reading through—tuning into—light
night's shadow—shadow's fuse

Tesla dreamt—of distance—collapsing





High Water Mark

TOM LARSEN

I'M REMINDED of it every time I walk into the liquor store. Those black and white photos under the countertop, Main Street to the bridge just a cluster of rooftops, the liquor store itself half submerged. One shot shows the shadow of a helicopter against the church belfry, another, a row of humpback car roofs curved above the water. Not enough of the River's Edge restaurant, or what was left of it, a few too many of local boys in rowboats clowning for the camera. Up in the corner, my favorite by far, the Yardley Bridge after Ray Moser's house took it down.

For old timers like me the flood of '55 was the biggest thing ever, a bona fide disaster in our own backyard. Most folks here now lived someplace else or weren't born yet. The flood still stands as the worst on record, but for a boy of seven it was all you could ask for.

We hadn't lived here long, maybe six months. A job transfer and mom's relentless fertility convinced my father that the country was the place for us. His timing might have been better but his choice of home sites, the only house on the only hill, was a self-proclaimed "stroke of genius." The neighbor's preferred "dumb luck" but my father was not a lucky man. Happenstance is how I see it. Someone was going to live on that hill.

Ray and I hadn't yet met when his house knocked the bridge down, but I knew the house. One of the few on the river side of the road, a green, clapboard box with a wrap around porch. There may have been pilings in the front, but the house faced the water so I couldn't swear to it. I only saw the rear, set so close to the road you could lean out and hit it with a stick. I got to know Ray later on in high school. He wasn't the sharpest tack in the pack but he dwarfed every kid in our school. By fifteen Ray's neck was thicker than my waist. Still is. One year he went out for the football team and broke up his own backfield before the season started. I once saw him lift the front end of a '62 Oldsmobile on a bet then dangle the loser by his heels when he couldn't pay up. Ray was a good old boy from humble beginnings and he's done all right for himself, as far as I can see.

But like I said, the flood came before we met.

It started with a rumor, record snowmelt in the

mountains and creeks overflowing. Much was made of a dam somewhere up north. As the days passed all talk turned to the river, tight-lipped tones that can only mean trouble. At first I was skeptical. My father was always warning of catastrophes that never happened or pronouncing the end to things that didn't end. Adults liked to worry, I was convinced. They came from a time when the worst DID happen on a regular basis. Depression, war, polio. You couldn't live with my father and not know these things. But all that had been fixed by now. The world was different, wasn't it?

Then it rained, steadily, for days. The skies turned gray and steamy and the river ran with mud. The news spoke of previous floods and the possibility of evacuation. I'd seen enough television to know what evacuation meant.

I tried to picture what a flood would look like but the images were like snapshots. The bottom half of familiar things under water, no overview, nothing of scope. One night I dreamed the river rose above its banks, but instead of overflowing it continued up in a clear wall of water. I could see right inside, follow the current, watch fish swimming past. I knew it wouldn't be like that but how it would be, I couldn't imagine.

The National Guard showed up on Saturday morning. From the upstairs dormer my brother and I watched a convoy of trucks line up on River Road. Then a jeep with a bullhorn summoned all able-bodied men to the sandbag brigade. They would build a wall of sandbags to hold the river in, as my father explained it. An idea so simple you had to wonder why the folks upriver hadn't thought of it. Those towns with vaguely familiar names already making the papers. It would take years of nightly news footage for me to get it. Sandbagging is pure ritual. The last thing you do before fate kicks your ass. One night you see valiant citizens manning the barricades, the next you see the same people living on the roof. But this was 1955 before the nightly news got going. Back in the days when they thought it would work.

So sandbag they did. Spurred by forecasts of more rain and dire news from the north, they worked all day and into the night. Bronzed guardsmen stripped to the waist, pasty CPA's and salesmen straining to pull

An iceclimber scales Uncompagne Gorge in Ouray Ice Park.

Preceding Photo/JOE SAMBATORO

A farm cow gazes into a mirrored pond.

Photo/DEREK KANSWISHER



their weight. As darkness fell they brought in floodlights. Caught in the blinding glare the men moved like zombies, mud-soaked and wasted as wives and children huddled close by. Behind us stretched the wall itself, barely waist high with sections missing and gaps you could stick your brother's head through. My faith in adults, already shaken, dissolved forever in the muck.

Sometime after midnight the sandbags ran out. The men staggered home too tired to talk. For the next six hours we hovered by the radio. Reports called for the river to crest the following day at just below flood level. I wondered how they could be so specific now, after days of uncertainty. It was all scientific, my father assured us, based on calculations too complicated to explain. The calculations of men who would build a two-mile wall from a mile of sandbags.

With the official deadline came a surge of dread that frazzled the nerves. It would get worse and we knew it, which made it worse yet. People did peculiar things. Mrs. Denbeck, next door, spent the night digging tulips bulbs from her garden. Jack Reiser ran out and bought a boat. The deadline made it a race against time, the river inching ever upward, us watching with all our might. My father packed the car with valuables then locked the keys in the trunk. My mother talked for hours with people she couldn't stand.

The river moved at a frightening speed, spilling into gullies and low lying farms. Just past nightfall they closed River Road from the valley to Taylorsville. Farther south the Mosers bunched on the porch watching the muddy water sluice around tree trunks, backing away as it trickled through porch slats. Taking up suitcases, boxes, an old radio, pausing to linger while police cars idled patiently. At least that's how I've come to see it.

In fact, I remember nothing of that night. A shrink would say I blocked it out, an overload of drama tripping the breakers. Disaster veterans would say it's a common, some little-known syndrome with a twelve letter name. All I know is after half a century a single image endures, my brother and me at the dormer window looking out into the fading light. That's it. Nothing of the helicopters and sirens, the impenetrable darkness, the dam crumbling somewhere to the north. Nothing of the grim faced newcasters, my mother's hysteria, my father's stunned disbelief. The unforgettable, gone without a trace.

In the morning I awoke in my brother's bed. My first thought was that we were safe. The house was standing and we were still in it, but there was a strange shimmer to the light and I could hear thumping from the next room. I rolled out of bed to find my brother at



the window, bouncing crazily on his heels. Coming up beside him I saw the thing I couldn't imagine. The river right across the street, a wide sheet of brown speeding by, left to right. Familiar houses were half submerged, distant trees nearly covered.

"Lookit!" my brother gawked. "Lookit! Look-it!"

"Where's dad?"

In the kitchen thumbing through the Yellow

"Might be something to see," he grinned.

My guess is we would have, too, had my brother held his position instead of rushing to tell of his latest sighting. As he spun from the dormer his knee caught the edge of an exposed heater duct opening a gash that would tie up the day. The rest is a blur of rushing around and bloody towels. My mother chanting "ohmygod, ohmygod," as we fishtailed off to the emergency room.

According to Mr. Burkhart, a passing tree

“

All I know is after half a century a single image endures, my brother and me at the dormer window looking out into the fading light. That's it. Nothing of the helicopters and sirens, the impenetrable darkness, the dam crumbling somewhere to the north.

”

Pages. The river had crested he tried to assure me, but I caught sight of the motel ads.

"We've got to get out of here," I sputtered.

"Let's give it another hour. See what happens."

My mother was in the living room with Mrs. Burkhart and a lady I'd never seen before. They sat in silence watching the river roll past the picture window. Outside I could see Mr. Burkhart at the foot of our driveway casting a line. A sofa drifted by, the pillows tucked neatly in the corners. I thought of the sandbags twenty feet below.

FOR ONCE THE EXPERTS were right. At 10 AM the waters crested and by mid afternoon the river was in retreat. My father and I moved the picnic table from the back porch to the front lawn and we watched, listening to bulletins on the radio. Up in the dormer little brother was beside himself, shouting "lookit, lookit" at every stupid thing. Mr. Burkhart returned with news that a house had been washed into the trees off of River Road. If it broke loose it would almost certainly hit the Yardley bridge.

"The Moser place," he told us. "Just passed Mt Airy Road."

"Can you beat that?" my father stared out at the water. Mr. Burkhart lit a cigarette and settled onto the picnic bench. "You know the upper road's still open. We can be there in fifteen minutes," he said matter-of-factly.

I saw the lines of worry fade from my father's face.

punched the house loose about 3:00 PM, twirling it off in a "furious pinwheel." The porch at an angle, appearing then disappearing, picking up speed and taking on water. The consensus was it would never make the bridge, that it would break up or sink when it hit Scudder's Falls. But the falls were buried like everything else and the house plowed on without losing a shingle. After that it was just a matter of time.

I think of that day as a missed opportunity, me, my dad and half a bridge coming down. Who knows what might have passed between us? Gathered on a hillside, rising up as Ray's house rounds the bend, watching it whirl into the stretch, the distance closing, the doomed bridge waiting.

Instead it was Etch-a-Sketch and hospital boredom.

FOR THREE DAYS the valley was covered, the high water marked in scum on the housetops, everything below coated in mud.

The Corps of Engineers would later repair the bridge, connecting the two remaining sections to four smaller green ones. The clash in size and color and the odd imbalance seemed to make the local folks uneasy. Three years later the bridge was demolished and never rebuilt. The Mosers moved to Dolington where Raymond lives still. The last time we met I asked him how he felt when his house took the bridge down.

Ray just shrugged. "To tell the truth, I don't remember."

Water is both beautiful and mundane in its daily uses.

Photo/ELIZABETH RUFF

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Bonnie From Harlowton

JIM SKOGEN

I wish you were there, seven hundred miles away
where spring comes in March and rivers
shut the Interstate so you can't return
or remember these machine bones
in our junkyard front yard

They keep tulips there
that nose up early
push frost aside and live
bloom and seed
before our backdoor snowdrift melts

I wish you were anywhere
but here with me and all the trucks
your father and his brothers owned
a wealth of sky, no rain
not grass enough for anything, too far from town to sell

Footprints marking what water leaves behind under Orange St. in Missoula, MT
Photo/BRITTA BAKER





Fixing a Hole in the Ocean

KIM HEACOX

Excerpt from Kim Heacox's forthcoming novel Fixing a Hole in the Ocean. Copyright (c) 2011, Kim Heacox. Used by permission of the author.

EVERYTHING CHANGES in the wilderness. On stormy days I sometimes walk the Gustavus beach with Melanie, my wife and best friend, a career park ranger in Glacier Bay, and my neighbor, Hank Lentfer, a fellow writer and musician. They love Gustavus as I do, with all its funky charm and salt-bitten manners. Others in town – perhaps the most liberal town in Alaska – see endless economic growth as the utopian zeitgeist of our time, a Faustian pact, a domestic madness that's already done more harm than good and is only getting worse. Nature to them is the original church, something to honor and protect. I know about these crazy, fun-loving, easy-to-laugh, dance-with-the-moon, pagan-like people. I'm one of them. We regard Glacier Bay National Park, right next door, as a sacred place, the best thing we've got going. Our animal spirits and ambitions aren't fueled by a growing economy. They're fueled by actual animal spirits: wolves and whales, sea lions and bears, the stories we tell and are told. We do our best to sleep on the ground at least once a year and awaken to a wildness that enchants and heals us, and keeps us young. We ride bikes and drive rusty old flatbed trucks and windshield-cracked Subarus, and hardly ever carry a wallet or lock a door. And we wave. If a passerby doesn't wave back, he's from out of town – forgive him. If he doesn't wave the second time, invite him to dinner. If he doesn't wave a third time and drives too fast, take his truck and give him a bike.

Drive fast in Gustavus? Where to? There's no place to go.

TO THE SOUTH, beyond deep swells and whitecaps on Icy Strait, dark clouds shred themselves on the ragged peaks of Chichagof Island. Winds lather the tips of the waves and the waves pound the shore and the shore takes it. To the north, the earth and sky fall away into Glacier Bay, the birthplace of blue ice and brown bears. At times it startles me so deeply I cannot move. I tell myself that this moment – this very moment – is enough.

The more I know the less I need.

Melanie takes my hand and we walk on.

At the top of the beach we stop. Radiant spokes of light spill through the storm and strike the sandy ground patterned with wolf tracks and wild strawberries. Thousands of small red fruit hide under leaves anointed by the rain. Nobody planted these. They're here on their own.

We drop to our knees and begin picking.

In the past, local kids have come out here on their ATVs to have fun and rip across these strawberry flats, the big, knobby tires tearing things up. But the ATV tracks are faint now. I'm not sure why. Maybe because gas prices have climbed so high the kids don't ride much anymore. Or because Hank volunteers at the local school to talk about respect for little things, and what it means to have a mature definition of wealth and progress. Or maybe the strawberries themselves, growing robustly this summer, have taken back the flats on their own.

Melanie smiles. She has red juice on her fingertips.

I hear Hank singing: "Let me take you down, 'cause I'm going to... Strawberry Fields..."

I wish for my part that my journey getting here didn't involve brotherly strife, but it does, together with finding home, falling in love and saying goodbye. It begins with a kid and a dog that think they can fly, a house cat that thinks he's a lion, a walk across Abbey Road, and a foray into the desert to find another Abbey – a writer named Cactus Ed – before arriving in small town Alaska where everything changes, from a world of strangers shaped by sprawl and rapid growth to one built on what we long ago left behind: deep gratitude and true community, a more authentic, wholesome life, a better way to be rich.

THAT NIGHT I hear wolves.

"They've been howling for days," Hank tells me the next morning. "Paul says they're down at the mouth of

the Good River on a moose kill.”

“Howling for days?” I say. “I didn’t hear them until last night.”

“That’s because you’ve had too much politics in your head, city council stuff, point-counterpoint, motions and resolutions. You’re finally becoming a musician again, getting back to being you.”

Getting back to being me? What does it mean? It means I’m free. I can jump on my bike and ride to where the road ends. I stash my bike and walk through the woods toward the river mouth. The moose is there, what’s left of him; he doesn’t look so good, encircled by wolf tracks but no wolves that I can see. They see me, though. I feel them sizing me up. What to do? I sit and read and listen to siskins and chickadees, and fall asleep near the dead moose. It’s hard work, waiting for wolves, listening to birds, sleeping. I awaken and look around. Something’s changed. The tracks? Is that it? Are there more tracks than before?

Why this fascination? Why this crazy desire to lie on the cold ground? Why not just stay indoors and Twitter my day away?

It’s the outside that’s deep inside, the wild part of me I walked away from ten thousand years ago. That’s why. I’m a time traveler. Wolves pose difficult questions and offer distant reflections of how far I’ve journeyed – we’ve all journeyed – down this crooked little path we call Western Civilization. Wolves howl instead of bark, they make music, not noise; they awaken the marrow in our bones, the luster in our eyes, the distant hunters we excelled at being and might be again one day. They never signed up for obedience training; I admire that. What wolves are to domestic dogs the Beatles are to the average church choir, wild creativity and improvisation versus rows of toffees indoctrinated to sing from the same standardized book.

The next morning, a Sunday, I intend to ride over to Bill Brown’s to watch sports with my friends. The Red Sox won the World Series awhile back – besting the Yankees in the pennant race by coming back from a 3-0 deficit, incredible – and ever since things seem possible in a way they didn’t before. But my bike has a mind of its own. It takes me in a direction away from Bill’s, back to where I was the day before, near the mouth of the Good River. So I sit and wait again and wonder as I’ve wondered before: What am I doing here? Not just on the Good River but Planet Earth, Galaxy Milky Way, Universe, Cosmos, Home.

THAT SUMMER, like every summer in Gustavus, young people arrive to work as chefs, waiters, rangers, maids, pizza throwers, kayak guides, fishing guides, biological technicians and research assistants. They have the best summer of their lives. Not much is convenient and they don’t care. They see whales, wolves and bears, and dance in rubber boots, and make new friends and fall in love and sleep on the ground and hear the earth breathe as they breathe with it. They meet old timers who fill their heads with stories. They lose themselves and find themselves and lose themselves again and call it magic, an enchantment, an awakening. Alaska isn’t just a state, it’s a state of mind. Glacier Bay isn’t just a national park, it’s a church of ice and grace, a holy place. Gustavus isn’t just a town, it’s a spirit, a story, a song.

*“I love your little town,” a woman
tells me a few days later.*

“Oh? Why?”

*“Your children are delightful. They
play outside.”*

“Where else would they play?”

It’s fun to see them stop and look around and attempt to comprehend it all. To the south: Tongass National Forest, at 17 million acres the largest national forest in the U.S. To the north: Glacier Bay National Park, 3.3 million acres, fifty percent larger than Yellowstone, much of it designated Wilderness. Beyond Glacier Bay: another 20 million acres of national parks and preserves.

Mountains never before climbed.

I like them that way. So does Hank, who grows a big garden and splits firewood in his bare feet and thinks progress is fine until we’ve had too much. He’s never

shopped at Wal-Mart or eaten at McDonald’s. If he did he’d probably throw up. Last winter he wanted to know if he got free miles each time he used his Alaska Airlines credit card to scrape ice off the windshield of his truck. If he did, he’d give the miles away.

A perfect mix of imperfections colors our town with a million little adversities and it’s these adversities – not affluence, prosperity or growth – that make us authentic. It’s gray, rainy hardships that cultivate our compassion and creativity, our deepest sense of community, a kinship of mutual survival. We need each other. Not just in how we live but also – and perhaps most important – how we die. Having lived so fully we go into the night unafraid, at the end of



Fishing for trout on Upper Twin Lake, Lake Clark National Park, Alaska. Photo/ERIN GRIFFIN

each day and the end of our lives. We die at home, like our friend Blair Awbry who went south for medical treatment but came back to walk daily with nature until cancer turned her bones to chalk. A joyous chef and fly fisherwoman, she loved rivers and laughing in the rain and it was time to die next to a river, to let go and receive hospice care from friends and neighbors. For three months we helped her go with dignity and love, without pain or fear. She never lost her sense of humor. She left us on winter solstice as Anya held her hand and sang under a cold crescent moon and a sky alive with the Milky Way. Goodbye Blair. You thanked us a hundred times, your voice a whisper at the end. Did you know the giving went both ways? Did you know your dying gave birth to a hundred beautiful moments, maybe a thousand?

THE RAIN FALLS so softly it's misting, just hanging there, too light to fall.

Melanie and I walk a quarter mile over to our neighbors, Larry and Karen Platt, to enjoy a Good River harvest potluck of moose ribs, coho salmon, garden vegetables, high-bush cranberry juice, and strawberry and nagoonberry pies. We arrive after dark to find the women sitting around a fire, their children asleep on their laps, water droplets beaded in their hair and thick wooly sweaters, each droplet a prism twinkling with firelight. They speak and laugh softly so as not to wake the kids. Nobody wears fancy Spandex, Gortex or Pyle. Just funky old clothes and genuine friendship, a summation of simple, grateful living. It occurs to me that all these women volunteer in our little town, and some live close to the poverty line, yet none are impoverished. They're all rich. There's no such thing as poverty inside a real community. It's one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen, that circle of friends in the firelight and mist.

And so I live where I do, and sink my fingers in my garden whenever I hear somebody rhapsodize about progress. Because modern America has become the first place on Earth where people have bigger homes, more consumptive lives and fewer friends than they used to.

"I love your little town," a woman tells me a few days later. She's from Florida.

“Oh? Why?”

“Your children are delightful. They play outside.”

“Where else would they play?”

“You don’t understand. Kids in America don’t play outside anymore. They’re wrinkle-free, stain-resistant and practically bubble-wrapped by mothers who are always nervous. They spend all their time indoors with their TVs, PlayStations, computers and cell phones, trapped in cages of their own making. It’s really sad.”

WE GUSTAVIANS are not pioneers. In many ways we live as people do in other parts of rural America, connected not by road but by boat and plane to a consumer culture and industrial nation. We have the Internet and radio; a basic materialism underlies our civility. Some of our homes are funky cabins with outhouses while others are modern three-bedroom affairs with hot running water and radiant floor heating. Many are artfully idiosyncratic, like the people who built them, and make the homes you see in suburbia look like cookie-cutter Tupperware houses.

The Gospel of Consumerism is no easy habit to break. My neighbors and I can get only so far away from how we were indoctrinated – as millions of Americans are – by the Liturgy on More, the idea that we can and must make a better life by always drilling and spending. Like rascals in a Mark Twain novel, we sit in the pews and squirm like hell, not in the middle anymore but in the back, goofing off, struggling with our hypocrisy and other discomforts as we shove up against the window to listen to a deeper wisdom.

“*Pebble Mine ... will be the largest sulfur cloud and open pit mine in North America, right out of Avatar, more than two square miles wide and two thousand feet deep, with five dams to hold two 1,000-acre sulfuric acid-laced tailing ponds, one higher than Hoover Dam on the Colorado River. All in an active earthquake zone requiring thirty-five billion gallons of water per year. For what?*”

THE SERPENT isn’t in the garden waiting. It never was. The explorer, pioneer and eager businessman all bring it with them, believing there is no virtue without piety. They make their children by the dozen and build straight lines where ancient curves used to be, and churn forests into mines, meadows into malls, wetlands into golf courses, all according to God’s will, they say, the grand plan. They give us what we have today: a modern, mechanized, madhouse theocracy scared to death of dying. Don’t be fooled by their handshakes and smiles. For many, Alaska is the far north-west corner of the all-you-can-eat continental buffet that began with Columbus and Cortez and continues as a whole new moveable feast, not as brutal as before but still hungry for profit and bounty, where roughnecks, gold hounds, statesmen, businessmen and timber fools sharpen their knives, kiss their children, give to charity and regard one man’s landscape rape as another man’s responsible development, the common sense thing to do.

If this sounds harsh, research Pebble Mine, proposed for the Iliamna Lake region of southwest Alaska, near Lake Clark National Park, in the heart of the Mulchatna caribou herd and the headwaters of Bristol Bay, the richest salmon fishery in the world. If approved it will be the largest sulfur cloud and open pit mine in North America, right

Illuminated snowflakes. Photo/ELIZABETH SHEARON

out of Avatar, more than two square miles wide and two thousand feet deep, with five dams to hold two 1,000-acre sulfuric acid-laced tailing ponds, one higher than Hoover Dam on the Colorado River. All in an active earthquake zone requiring thirty-five billion gallons of water per year. For what? Gold and copper. Jewelry and jobs. Molybdenum to make fancy surgical instruments. Long ago, economists labeled them “precious metals,” unmindful that we humans cannot eat gold as we do fish, or drink copper as we do fresh water. We cannot drink sulfuric acid, though we can do fancy surgery on somebody who’s been poisoned by it, and prolong his sickness.

Not exactly the restoration of nature.

Two days after an Environmental Protection Agency administrator traveled to Bristol Bay to meet with communities to hear their concerns, Alaska Representative Don Young filed a bill to strip the EPA of its power. His cup is full. Mr. Young has been in Congress for more than forty years and is a civil man until he disagrees with you on Pebble Mine, clearcutting the Tongass National Forest, drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge or any number of other resource development issues he supports, he says, “for the benefit of Alaskans.”

“So this is America,” said Ringo Starr in 1964. “They all seem out of their minds.”

ON A COLD NOVEMBER MORNING with my back to the sea, I wait for the wolf. An hour ago he followed me as I walked through the open forest toward the ocean. Head low, shoulders wide, ears up, close behind, he’s my four-legged shadow. I caught a glimpse of him and nothing more. When I pushed through thick brush and looked back, he was gone, the shape-shifter.

He’s still there somewhere, everywhere, and he might not be alone.

The other night Melanie and I heard them howl. No mistaking it. Dogs bark, wolves howl. Dogs make noise. Wolves make music. That’s not to say I don’t like dogs. I do. Some of my best friends have been dogs. They drooled on my shoes and shared my pillow and laughed at my jokes. Okay, they didn’t laugh at my jokes; they did listen, though. I grew up with Super Max the Wonder Dog who expressed his devotion to me without reservation. But living as I do now in the America that used to be, it’s wolves that inhabit and haunt me.

I kneel on the frozen ground.

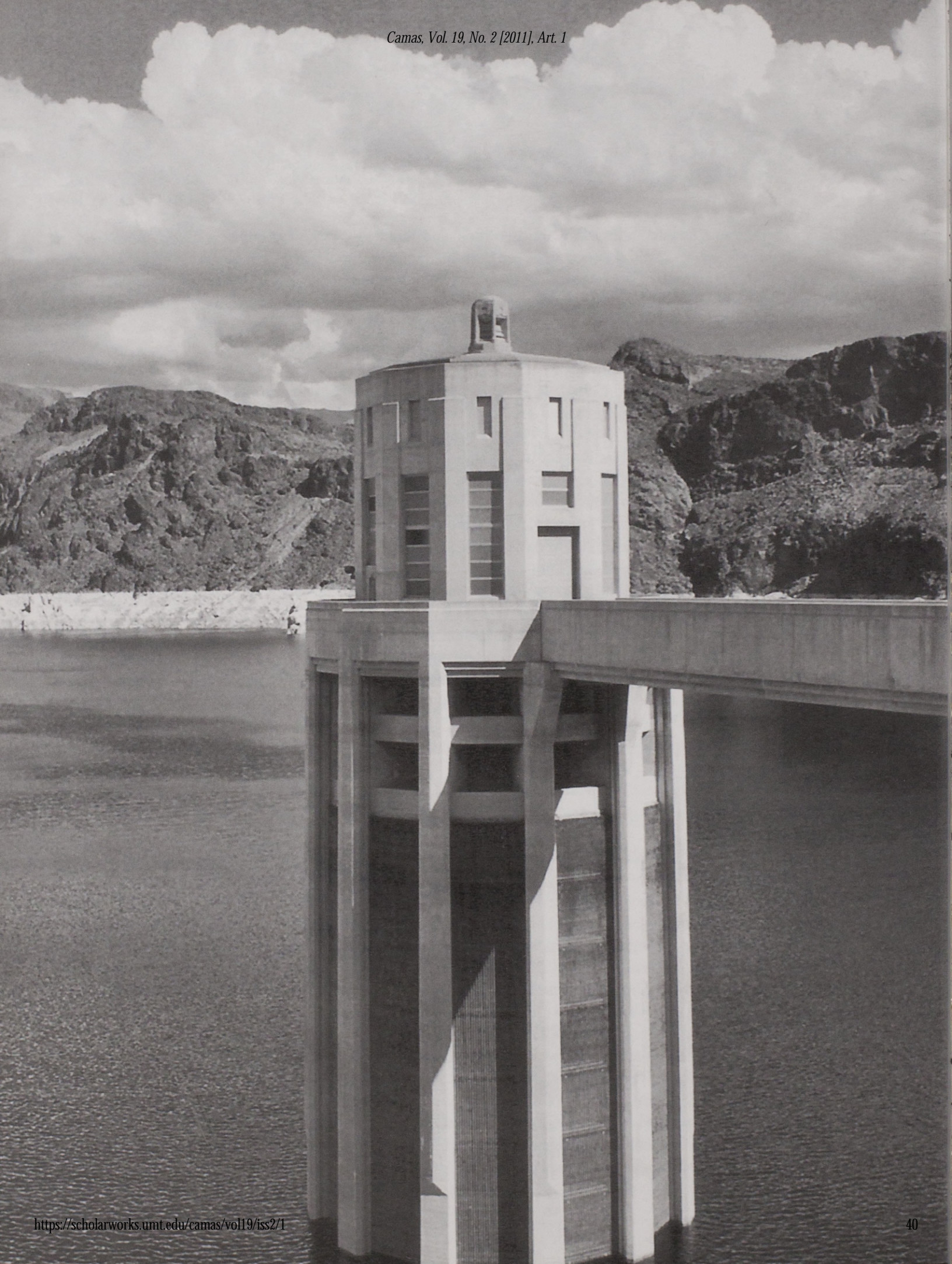
The mouth of Good River is a short distance to my right. Behind me, the ocean rises and falls with a thousand voices, and for a moment the earth is young and fetching again as she runs through a field of flowers, her skirt high, legs lean, head back, laughing.

I feel young myself, resilient in a way I never felt before coming here, touched by deep time and open space. In every direction is the Ice Age, so many mountains cut by glaciers, hundreds of rivers gray with silt, a land exuberant, the Earth’s crust rising after having been depressed by millions of tons of ice that entombed the area a couple hundred years ago. Everything invites me to slow down and breathe deeply of the cool Pleistocene air and to imagine, if only for a day, the way it used to be; to imagine in a way that confirms the imagination is not submissive, it’s subversive.

He’s watching me now, this wolf, a living allegory of wildness and loss. Watching me from beyond the forest fringe. I feel his intelligence sizing me up for what I am: Danger. Prey. Predator. Meat. He’s the dog that didn’t join our campfire thousands of years ago. The dog that refused our company and so remained a hunter, lean, alert, never fat. The dog that’s nobody’s pet, that wants no part of the soft sofa or short leash. The dog all other dogs descended from.

Awhile back a young schoolteacher died while jogging down a road outside a remote fishing village in southwest Alaska. People found her body surrounded by wolf tracks. It got everybody talking. With renewed enthusiasm, marksmen with the Alaska Department of Fish & Game gunned down wolves from helicopters and small airplanes. A story surfaced about a pack of wolves running through deep snow while being killed one at a time from above, as if trying to outrun the future. The last wolf launched himself off a cliff to avoid being shot. They got him anyway.

It’s an image that will never leave me.



The Year We Didn't Swim in the River

NOEL THISTLE TAGUE

*...and finding them dead,
found myself possessed of them forever.*

—Conrad Aiken

Mother, you will never be colder. Clasp your hands like a lady in church gloves, unclench your heart. Another low-slung storm cloud refuses the sun. Your last words: August, and still this freezing rain inside me. Somehow we believed the summer would revive him, gut the damp labyrinth of our loss, but his boat stays suspended above the dock, its wooden ribs dry and brittle. I am good daughter; I wear your photograph next to his, on the skin inside my clothes.

Four days I waited for the boy to wash up, greened as seaglass. Kissed my mother's granite lips while Search & Rescue raked the bottom of the bay; said my late goodbyes as they swept the moonless water with pale searchlights. Let go the first handful of dirt as they pulled him off the shoal, buoyant and dead as driftwood. A loaded bobber: imagine he was a bird in the black night, a loon uneasy with flight. Then falling to that sludgy dark, shadowed by fat, toothless bottomfeeders. Their feathers of gray filth. Their hook-torn lips on his skin, the suck.

Once there was a Year Without a Summer: 1816, summer of killing frosts and fatal snows. The summer Mary Shelley froze with her husband in Switzerland, was forced indoors and wrote *Frankenstein* to bide the time—my mother adored this tangent to history. But then she remembered the footnote: Shelley's abandoned other wife, drowning herself in a Hyde Park pond in December. The fish in those frigid waters sluggish, mouthing Oh, oh, oh. So this is the cold my mother knew, a sunlessness of the heart. The days for swimming have gone: soon the skim ice will move in, at once overnight like a blight from God. An orphan loon's fluttering wail, proof that all animals sorrow.

A Hoover Dam intake tower looms over Lake Meade near Boulder City, Nevada.

Photo/KATHLEEN GUNTON

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BRITTA BAKER lives, works, and makes things in Missoula. After growing up on Minnesota's agri-prairie and studying art in Chicago's concrete jungle, Montana's mountains seem a haven of wildness and inspiration.

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SAREN CALL was born and raised in southeast Idaho, where she developed an appreciation for quiet nights, sagebrush, and old trucks. She currently attends graduate school at The University of Montana.

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ERIN GRIFFIN, originally from the Adirondack Mountains of Northern New York, is now living and working as an environmental educator in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom.

KATHLEEN GUNTON's work appears in journals such as *Inkwell*, *Ruminate*, *Shenandoah*, *Blood and Thunder*, *Thema*, and *Westview*.

KIM HEACOX has authored several books, most recently *The Only Kayak*, a 2006 PEN USA Literary Award finalist. He writes from his home in Gustavus, Alaska, next to Glacier Bay National Park. In 2009 he appeared as an on-camera writer/consultant in the Ken Burns film, *The National Parks: America's Best Idea*. Learn more about him at www.kimheacox.com.

NATALIE HUNT is a professional photographer from Washington. She focuses primarily on wedding, sport, and event photography.

BEN JOHNSON grew up in Montana's Bitterroot Valley and has spent the last few years drifting around the west working on farms, exploring deserts, and playing in mountains. He currently calls Kelly, WY home.

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Andy Ambelang explores a tributary of the Colorado River.

Photo/BEN JOHNSON

Martha Jordan steps into a southern Cascades reservoir.

Back Cover Photo/NATALIE HUNT

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